The making of European road safety policy – ETSC's programmes and positions

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Abstract

The European Commission has set, in its White Paper on the Common Transport Policy, an ambitious target to reduce road deaths by 50% by the end of 2010. The 3rd Road Safety Action Programme makes clear that reaching the target is a shared responsibility. The EU has clearly a role to play, but Member states, car manufactures, infrastructure providers and non-governmental organisations cannot refrain from taking their share of responsibility.

ETSC believes that appropriate EU measures could deliver a substantial part of the targeted reduction by the year 2010. However, the role of the other stakeholders is equally important. With the “SEC Belt project”, the “Enforcement programme” and the “VOICE campaign”, ETSC takes its share of responsibility in road safety and will make a vital contribution to achieving the EU target by addressing areas of action where substantial gains can be made in a relatively short period of time.

Keywords: road safety, EU target, SEC Belt, VOICE, enforcement.
1 Introduction

Road crashes continue to be the main source of accidental death and injury in the European Union (EU) and throughout the world. Each year in EU countries almost 47,000 road users are killed and, when underreporting is taken into consideration, around 3.5 million are injured. Road accidents are the leading cause of death in Europe for people under the age of 50. This accounts for an annual cost of over 200 billion Euros and untold pain and suffering.

Whilst the complete prevention of road traffic collisions is for the time being, and is likely to remain, a remote theoretical prospect, there is abundant evidence that a substantial proportion of the deaths and injuries can be prevented by known, already available and cost-effective means, and still more by means on which research is already in progress or is envisaged. The desirability of doing so is widely recognised in principle – for example improving road safety is one of the 13 principal areas of action identified in the EU White Paper on transport policy – but to do so in practice requires coherent effective action jointly by a number of stakeholders ranging from individuals who use the roads in different ways to government agencies at all levels from local councils to the EU itself.

Complacency about the amount of death and injury on the roads can be shaken, motivation to address the problem strategically can be enhanced, and the sights of stakeholders can be raised, by the adoption of an appropriate vision or philosophy for road safety. The best known such vision is the Vision Zero adopted by the Swedish Parliament in 1997 and since espoused by several other Member States. This sets a “long-term goal … that nobody will be killed or seriously injured as a result of a traffic accident within the road traffic system”. A vision or philosophy providing a long-term goal and a succession of shorter-term targets can therefore have complementary effects in motivating respectively the initial development and the subsequent implementation of road safety strategies.

2 The EU target

The European Commission has set in its White Paper on the Common Transport Policy of September 2001 an ambitious target to reduce road deaths by 50% by the end of 2010.

The purpose of setting a casualty reduction target is generally accepted to be to provide a common goal for those involved with improving road safety. The target should be challenging in order to avoid complacency and focus efforts on
the most effective measures. If the target is not challenging then a major opportunity for encouraging the saving of lives will have been lost. On the other hand, in order to gain the support of the many people whose co-operation will be needed if the target is to be attained, the target needs to be achievable. If key people involved in improving road safety come to believe that a target has been set that is too demanding and which cannot be achieved, they will lose motivation and it will be difficult to make progress.

The Commission’s target is very ambitious: the targeted level of safety performance across the EU as a whole is more challenging than has ever been achieved in their own territories by even the best performing Member States (UK and Sweden).

Moreover, in May 2004, 10 new Member States with generally higher road crash injury risks than many existing Member States have joined the EU. With the enlargement of the EU to 25 members, the ambitious EU target becomes even more ambitious. As a matter of fact, the target will not only apply to the former EU 15 but to all the 25 members of the European Union. The 50% reduction will not have to be applied only to the almost 36,000 deaths of the EU-15 but will have to be reached on the more than 47,000 deaths of the EU-25.

Meeting the EU target means encouraging the use of the safer modes of travel, targeting reductions in total numbers of deaths, reducing the highest risks borne by vulnerable road users, and using the holistic approach to the safety of the traffic system which has been more evident in the other transport and travel modes. Preventing road death and disabling injury means a traffic system that is better adapted to the needs, errors and physical vulnerabilities of its users rather than one which expects users to cope with increasingly demanding conditions.

3 The Third Road Safety Action Programme

Experience shows that setting a target is a meaningless act unless backed up by practical attempts to reach it. The EU commitment has therefore been reinforced by the 3rd Road Safety Action Programme, adopted in spring 2003, which identifies more than 60 individual measures – that is more than 60 stepping stones in reaching the EU target of halving road deaths by 2010. The Programme makes clear from the cover page that reaching the target is a shared responsibility.

Reaching the target will not be easy and will be practically impossible if the EU is let alone in its actions. Road safety must be a shared responsibility, where shared responsibility means everyone’s responsibility and not nobody’s responsibility. The EU has clearly a role to play, but Member states, car
manufactures, infrastructure providers, non-governmental organisations cannot refrain from taking their share of responsibility.

The EU has broad scope to act on road safety and should act to address systematically the most important common road safety problems in the following areas:

- Legislating where it has exclusive and shared responsibilities;
- Using financial instruments and support to create a market for safety;
- Encouraging best practice and information exchange;
- Accident and injury data gathering and analysis;
- Research and development towards future solutions.

ETSC estimates that appropriate EU measures could save at least 50% of the targeted reduction by the year 2010. The role of other stakeholders becomes pivotal in delivering the remaining 50%.

ETSC has taken its share of responsibility and is doing so by the development of activities in three areas which have a great potential for road safety improvement: the countries where risk is higher, enforcement of existing legislation and vulnerable road users. In these three areas of action substantial gains can be made in a relatively short period of time.

4 The SEC-Belt project

Road safety is not equally distributed across the EU-15. There is what one can call a “North-South Divide”. While Northern European countries have developed and implemented plans and policies that have significantly improved road safety, the South of Europe generally lies below an EU-15-average in relation to almost all safety indicators. In addition to this already existing imbalance, the road safety situation in the 10 new member states suggests the emergence of another divide. Average fatality risk in the EU-10 is higher than 3 times the EU-15 average, slightly higher than Greece (worst performing EU-15 country), and 5 times higher than the UK (best performing EU-15 country). If this trend continues, it will lead to a permanent situation in which the “North-South Divide” is complemented with a “West-East Divide”. What evolves is a belt of unsafe countries stretching across Southern, Eastern and Central Europe – the so-called SEC Belt.

As a matter of fact, by looking at a map of Europe, one can see that Europe is framed by a belt of countries displaying an unsatisfying road safety performance.
This belt stretches from the South, towards the Centre and the East of Europe. Road fatalities are significantly higher in this belt and citizens are exposed to greater risks than in most North-Western European countries. ETSC has called this belt the SEC Belt where SEC stands for Southern, Eastern and Central European countries. However, SEC is also the French word for dry. And this is no coincidence: ETSC believes that safety in these countries is not an impossibility, but rather a question of cultivating that which has fallen dry. It is this kind of safety cultivation that the ETSC project is meant to deliver. The countries within the SEC Belt comprise Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain – all countries that display death rates per billion motor vehicle km above the EU-15 average.

The overall aim of the SEC Belt project is to contribute to a durable improvement of transport safety in those countries where the highest potential for improvement lies. The project, started in January 2004 and lasting until December 2006, is meant to identify risks and opportunities, evaluate data and policies, and promote practice and behaviour.

Half-way through the project, some provisional conclusions can already be drawn. There are three main barriers that need to be overcome if the SEC Belt countries are to improve their road safety performance to a level that can allow the EU to reach its target. First of all, political barriers: most of these countries show a lack of political will to accord road safety a high priority. The countermeasures are very often well known but the political will is lacking. Secondly, economic barriers prevent effective road safety measures from being taken: the lack of available financial resources for road safety is a sad reality at all levels of government. Finally, legal barriers represent an obstacle to effective road safety work: there is evidence that drivers in the SEC Belt, “encouraged” by a lower level of enforcement, tend to be less respectful of traffic laws and to adopt dangerous behaviours.

4.1 Vulnerable road users in the SEC Belt

A part of the SEC Belt project is devoted to the needs of vulnerable road users. ETSC has therefore organised, in the course of May 2004, three different Seminars in Spain, Poland and the Czech Republic where experts from the 16 SEC Belt countries have been asked to identify problems and formulate recommendations on the needs of vulnerable road users from the three traditional pillars of road safety: user behaviour, infrastructure and the vehicle.
As a result of these seminars ETSC has published an important Policy Paper containing more than 60 recommendations on how to effectively improve the safety of pedestrians, cyclists and powered two wheelers and serving as an invaluable tool for policymakers at all levels to guide and benchmark their policies towards vulnerable road users.

Strikingly, most of the recommendations concern standards for cars and their drivers, rather than setting requirements for pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists themselves. With speed being a major factor in both likelihood and severity of a crash, the Policy Paper recommends legal speed limits to be properly enforced, especially in urban areas, and Intelligent Speed Adaptation to be introduced in cars. To bring down accidents involving drunk drivers, the EU should impose a legal blood alcohol level of no more than 0.5 mg/ml, which drivers must be brought to adhere to. Furthermore, the EU should mandate the use of daytime running lights by all vehicles. Lorries that are already on the market should be retrofitted with blind spot mirrors, and high standards of forgiving car fronts should be adopted to lessen the impact of a crash.

Concerning the vulnerable road users themselves, it is of course vital that they avoid dangerous behaviour and protect themselves. Helmet use among motorised two-wheelers must be brought up to 100%, including moped riders. Anti-locking braking systems (ABS) should be made mandatory for all motorcycles. Based on the experience of the European New Car Assessment Programme (EuroNCAP), the EU should also consider the possibility of setting up a European New Motorcycle Assessment Programme (EuroNMAP).

Finally, infrastructure should not be designed from a car user perspective but should be built in such a way to be forgiving towards the needs and physical vulnerabilities of vulnerable road users, both in rural roads and in urban areas. Finally, road safety audits should be carried out and the needs of vulnerable road users should receive high consideration in the course of the process.

4.2 Other SEC Belt activities

At the end of 2005, ETSC will also publish two important Reviews compiled by leading EU independent experts. The first Review will deal with improving transport accident data. The safety problems in the SEC Belt countries are in fact partly linked to problems of data collection, analysis and dissemination. This Review is gathering and evaluating specific transport accident data from the SEC Belt countries and developing clear policy recommendations.
The second Review will deal with the evaluation of national road safety policies across the SEC Belt countries. It is going to have the character of an ETSC handbook for evaluating national transport policies allowing national safety experts to both assess and benchmark their policies.

The SEC Belt project is also dealing with the promotion of best practice with the publication of a periodic Newsletter and of 12 Fact Sheets on different aspects of road safety.

All the above mentioned activities will certainly help in reducing the unacceptably high death rates in the SEC Belt countries thus also contributing to the achievement of the ambitious EU target.

5 The Enforcement Programme

The second ETSC activity contributing to the achievement of the EU target is the Enforcement Programme. With the adoption of the “Commission Recommendation on enforcement in the field of road safety” the European Commission has implemented one of the most effective measures of the 66 listed in its 3rd Road Safety Action Programme. If traffic rules were thoroughly checked and sanctioned, more than 14,000 lives could be saved and 680,000 injuries avoided on European roads each year.

The effectiveness of enforcement activities is best shown by the example of France where improvements in the enforcement and punishment of acts of road violence, implemented by the French government in mid-2002, led to a spectacular drop in the number of casualties observed since the second half of 2002, and repeated in both 2003 and 2004.

The implementation of the Commission Recommendation, however, needs to be closely monitored. It is in particular the monitoring and assessment of road safety policies and measures on the national and European level that are crucial in determining whether Europe is on the right track to achieve its ambitious target by 2010. The need to follow closely the road safety activities of all EU member countries is also recognised by the Recommendation in that it states the Commission’s determination to adopt more binding legislation if continuous monitoring reveals that EU members are unwilling to establish efficient enforcement policies within a given time frame.

ETSC will promote best practice not only regarding traffic law enforcement carried out by the police, but also through "self-enforcing" cars and roads. The programme therefore focuses on all three pillars of transport safety policymaking:
The user. Traditionally, enforcement is understood as police enforcement, ensuring compliance with traffic rules. Police enforcement actions should be planned, monitored and evaluated according to the Commission Recommendation.

The vehicle. Enforcement technologies such as alcohol interlocks, seat belt reminders or intelligent speed adaptation devices have an important role to play in securing compliance with key traffic rules. Their implementation requires additional awareness and support from car makers for a genuinely safe use of their products. Manufacturers have a social responsibility to ensure that their cars and trucks are utilised in compliance with current traffic rules. Manufacturers can take up that social responsibility of theirs by equipping their products with state-of-the-art “enforcement technology” (e.g. intelligent speed adaptation devices, alcohol interlocks, seat belt reminders).

The infrastructure. Ensuring appropriate road user behaviour is also a question of efficient enforcement design, i.e. of constructing self-enforcing roads. There are good examples from Member States that should be identified and promoted amongst policymakers across Europe.

ETSC’s Enforcement programme aims to promote Best Practice in police enforcement across Europe by monitoring, assessing and reporting on the activities at EU member state level. The programme will make a significant contribution to bringing up enforcement levels in those member countries whose safety performance is below EU average, and it will also help the safer countries in Europe to still improve their performance. Overall, it will contribute to a harmonisation of enforcement levels across Europe, and it will help to achieve a fairer distribution of safety at the highest practicable level. By acting as an independent enforcement “watch dog”, ETSC aims at ensuring that the objectives of the non binding EU Recommendation on enforcement are properly met and, in parallel, collect sufficient evidence to call for the adoption of more binding EU legislation, i.e. a Directive.

6 The VOICE Campaign

VOICE is a Europe-wide campaign to protect vulnerable road users. The principle aim of this ETSC activity is to raise awareness of the needs of vulnerable road users among EU policy makers such that they more readily accept responsibility for the implementation of the measures necessary for the protection of cyclists and pedestrians.

In light of the EU 3rd Road Safety Action Programme’s call for the “sharing of responsibility”, this campaign will remind politicians, bureaucrats and
industrialists of their own particular responsibility. It will call for the kind of political leadership that is necessary for decision makers to accept their responsibilities, an approach that has in the past paid large safety benefits.

On EU roads vulnerable road users, such as the cycling child, or the elderly pedestrian, are the most at risk. To transport policy makers the needs of these vulnerable travellers are frequently somewhat neglected if not forgotten: they have become the "forgotten travellers" of transport policy.

As a result of this neglect they are exposed to risks far above those of the average driver on European roads. For example 5% of road deaths in 2002 where children under 15 making road crashes the leading cause of death for children, whilst cycling and walking have a fatality risk per distance travelled 7-9 times higher than car travel.

But there are measures that can truly improve the situation of younger and older pedestrians and cyclists in Europe. Such measures would apply a systemic approach to road safety advocating effective and stronger enforcement of traffic laws, as well as measures improving the design and construction of vehicles and roads to account for human behaviour. Moreover, many of these solutions are ready for implementation, both from a technical and legal point of view. What is often missing is the political will from decision-makers in politics and industry who have been hesitant to accept their particular responsibility and make widely available what is already feasible. Without a will to accept responsibility by Europe's decision makers, there will be no lasting motivation to protect vulnerable road users alongside a tolerance of continued high levels of their injury and death.

7 Conclusion

The reasons for the unacceptably high death and injury rates in the European countries are manifold and stretch over all three areas of road safety work – the vehicle, the infrastructure and the user.

Recent data show that, whereas the 15 pre-enlargement countries are improving their road safety performance and are making progress towards the achievement of the target, the 10 countries of the most recent wave of accession are stagnating. However, if the target is to be reached, additional measures need to be proposed in the forthcoming mid-term review of the Third Road Safety Action Programme and all relevant stakeholders, including Members States, infrastructure managers, car manufactures and road safety organisations, have to accept their share of responsibility.
With the SEC Belt Project, the Enforcement Programme and the VOICE campaign ETSC will continue to take its share of responsibility by addressing three areas of action where substantial gains can be made in a relatively short period of time: countries with a higher risk, enforcement of existing legislation and vulnerable road users.

References


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